

“Before you Unfriend”
Matthew 18:15-20
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
September 4, 2011

Introduction to the Reading

Two weeks ago we spoke a bit
about how hard it is to be in the world,
but not of the world.

Springing from Paul’s words in Romans 12:

“... by the mercies of God, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by
the renewing of your minds”...

we talked about those e Biblical and theological struggles
that are going on in the larger church
and how much we conform to a very divisive world
by our divisiveness in the church.

Today, Jesus also speaks to relationships in the church,
yet he zooms in from the larger church
to look at the relationships
between individual Christians in the church.

Our reading is from Matthew, Ch. 18:15-20:

If another member of the church sins against you,
just talk about him behind his back.

If another member of the church sins against you,
call the biggest gossip you know and complain to them.

If another member of the church sins against you,
send her a nasty email
with lots of capital letters and underlines
and exclamation points.

Or, if another member of the church sins against you,
don’t say anything. Forget ‘em!
Delete their contact information.
Unfriend them on Facebook.
And if need be to avoid them, leave the church.

This is the word of the Lord.

No. THIS is the word of the Lord.

¹⁵“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Sermon

Thankfully, it doesn't happen all that often,
but from time to time I have to watch
as some member of the church loses
his or her romantic notions about Christians.
Sometimes all it takes is serving on a committee
that has always done it this way.
Other times it's having an idea
that runs crosswise of someone else's idea.
But whatever it is, sooner or later something is said...
feelings get hurt...
motivations are questioned...
and right before my eyes
a person's idyllic image of the church crumbles into dust.
“I thought we were all supposed to be Christians here.
I get enough of this at work!
Why can't we just get along?”

Their response to this “opening of their eyes”
is fairly predictable:
there is a gradual withdrawal from church activities –
worship attendance becomes more sporadic,
saying no to additional invitations to serve,
possibly a little church shopping.
But eventually, that early enthusiasm wanes
and is replaced by a more “realistic” view.

I suppose this shouldn't surprise us Presbyterians.
After all, we invented the doctrine

of the “total depravity of humankind,” right?
It’s a good Calvinist doctrine.
Pride and power... self-interest and greed...
these “all-to-human” impulses will always creep in somewhere,
says Reinhold Niebuhr.
The fact is people are still people
whether they are in the church or not...
which inspired Henry Ward Beecher to say,
“I don’t need John Calvin to tell me about total depravity,
I have my congregation to show me that!”

Well, apparently Jesus had his merry band of twelve
to show HIM that!
Because what today’s text show us
is that though he was divinely incarnate,
he was not divinely naïve.
He knew it wouldn’t be easy.
He knew that even well-meaning disciples
would eventually disagree or offend or hurt each other.
He knew that where two or more Christians
gathered in his name, there was bound to be an argument.
So just before he heads to Jerusalem
and what will face him there,
he lays aside the parables of the kingdom long enough
to talk some about the nitty-gritty of church order.
And in so doing, he offers us a fairly detailed process
for dealing with the conflicts that inevitably arise in the church.
Though I’m guessing that this step-by-step method
sounds sort of strange as it hits our ears,
through it Jesus announces extraordinarily good news:
He is with us as we engage in this process
of healing and reconciliation.
“For where two or three are gathered in my name,” he says,
“I am there among them.”

Step One is person-to-person,
face-to-face honesty.
If you have a problem with someone in the church,
deal with it directly.
Don’t take it out to the parking lot.
Don’t talk behind their back.

Don't embarrass the person in public.
And don't just bury it in your heart.
Go to the person... in love... wanting to be reconciled...
and deal with it directly.

Easier said than done, isn't it?
At least it is for me.
I don't know if it's that I grew up in the South
or if it's just my temperament or what...
but the idea of confronting a person who has hurt me
is a most unpleasant thing.
And the truth is that if like me, you happened to grow up in a family
that tended to sweep things under the rug...
or who used sarcasm or biting humor
as a way to respond to hurts...
you may have never learned how to do this...
you never had anyone model how to confront someone
in a direct and healthy way.
I'm here to testify that this is something we can learn –
there are people who can help us work through our feelings...
a counselor... a pastor... a good friend...
there are people who can help us figure out
what to do and what to say.
In other words, we can learn to communicate in a way
that is both direct and loving... honest and respectful.
And most important,
remember that Jesus has promised to be with you.
Where two or three are gathered in his name,
he is there along with them.

Though it may be hard for some of us
to confront a sister or brother,
there are certainly others for whom confrontation
comes a little too easy.
We rather enjoy telling others
how they have sinned against us:
husbands, wives, parents, kids, co-workers, neighbors...
and yes, even church members.
The story is told that while George Bernard Shaw
was still a music critic,
he was having dinner with a friend

in a restaurant that provided a live orchestra.
Shaw thought the orchestra was mediocre at best,
but the conductor, having recognized him,
sent him a note asking him
what he would like the orchestra to play next.
Shaw replied, "How about dominoes?"

Apparently, Shaw met his match
when he took on Winston Churchill.
He once sent Churchill two tickets
to the opening night of one of his plays with this note:
"One for yourself and one for a friend... if you have one."
Not to be outdone, Churchill wrote back,
expressing his regret at being unable to attend and
asking for tickets for the second night,
"That is, if there is one."¹

Some people have no trouble talking straight...
no qualms about confronting others...
they even enjoy it.
Which is even more reason to remember that
"Where two or three are gathered in his name,
he is among them."

Well, should this first attempt fail,
Step Two is to try again,
but this time to include another church member or two
in the conversation.
Make a second attempt, Jesus says,
taking one or two others
so that it's not just a he said – he said,
she said – she said.
Jesus' intent is not for the one who has been offended
to gang up on the offender –
these witnesses are not there to testify "against" the person –
they are there to witness the interaction...
to hear the conversation...
to represent the church.

¹ William Carl, III, in "Straight Talk, Due Process and Grace," published in *Church People Beware!*

But wait a minute!

Whatever problem there is between two people in the church
is just between them.

It's really is nobody else's business.

Well, not exactly.

Because if we really take seriously Paul's image
of the body of Christ,
then it's not just about the two,
but about the whole body.

If the relationship between two members of the body is broken,
the whole body feels the pain.

Whether it's a family feud in a little country church
or resentment between two session members of a big church,
the health of the parts matters to the health of the whole body.

And finally, Step Three...

when all efforts at reconciliation fail, what do you do then?

I like how Tom Long asks this question:

“What about sinners who,
weary of the church's knocking
with offers of covered dishes of repentance
and platters of restoration,
what happens when they shut the door and lock it,
insisting on the quarantine of sin
rather than the healing power of forgiveness?”

“Then,” Jesus says, “Let such a one be to you
like a Gentile and a tax collector.”

In other words, let the church take the dire step
of shunning them... excommunicating them.

If a member does not wish to be in fellowship
with the rest of the church,
grant their wish and leave them alone.²

Well, though shunning and excommunication sound harsh to us,
there are two things we should remember here.

The first is how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors –
he welcomed them and ate with them.

And the second is that forgiveness is always the goal.

We didn't read it as part of our text this morning,

² Thomas G. Long in his commentary on Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion (WJK-1997) p. 210.

but no sooner has Jesus outlined this process
for repairing broken relationships than, Peter,
who is sort of the official question-asker for the church,
asks him to clarify.
“I hear what you’re saying Jesus...
you know, about reconciliation and all...
but supposing someone sins against me...
how many times should I extend forgiveness?”
Peter wants to know if there is a statute of limitations on sin.
“How many times does a Christian
have to get on the forgiveness treadmill?
As many as seven times?” asks Peter...
thinking that was a generous number.
“No, Jesus says, not seven times,
but seventy-seven times.”
The exact number is not the point, of course.
The point is not to calculate forgiveness.

Some years ago I deeply offended someone in the church.
This was a long-time member...
a man who literally had grown up in that church.
This was someone I had a significant relationship with...
someone I considered a friend.
Though you don’t need to know all the details,
when I preached his mother’s funeral
I said something that I wrongly assumed
I had permission to speak about.
You can surely imagine
how betrayed and angry and hurt he felt.
I didn’t intend any harm, but I clearly did harm.

Well, he called me the next day.
I don’t know if it had anything to do
with Jesus’ words in Matthew 18,
but he called me and asked to meet with me.
He confronted me with what I had done.
He did it respectfully... he did it in love.
And he was right. I had messed up.
I should’ve done things differently
and if I could do it over, I would.
I asked for his forgiveness, and he gave it to me.

My sin was not forgotten, but it was forgiven.

It was one of the most difficult conversations I had ever had.

And I hope I never have to have another one like it.

But it was worth it.

Because what happened as we talked...

what happened as I asked to be forgiven...

what happened when he forgave me...

is that together we experienced a little bit of heaven on earth.

As the two of us were gathered together in Jesus' name,

he was there with us.

That I know with all my heart.